

AN OPINION ON SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF BUDO

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Uncertainty has always been a hindrance to decision and hence to progress. More often than not, many Aikido students feel awkward and uncertain when asked to explain clearly why they train, as if they are not satisfied with their own explanations, or are unable to identify themselves with the answers they provide. This does not seem to be the case with people who train in Judo, or Karate and even more with those who train in boxing, wrestling or other fighting sports.

Yet, there should be something in common for people who practice all these arts and sports, in terms of motivation and aspiration if not skills and abilities. Trying to locate a point of convergence, we may conclude that what people search for, when they make a decision to train in martial arts, is power. The difficulty that Aikido people have to state it clearly, is a result partly of the difficulty to understand its underlying principles (i.e. power through softness/flexibility) and partly of an ideology surrounding this art, based on inappropriate or poorly interpreted terms and ideas (such as harmony, love, self development etc). There could be a lengthy discussion about these matters, but the point to keep is that search for power is at the core of Aikido training as in all martial arts. If power is absent, martial arts are little more than a meaningless choreography.

At the beginning of training this search is vague and there is a lot of confusion, as the body is not properly built, the mind is not calm enough, the movements are not coordinated and techniques are not assimilated. As the years and experience are accumulated, the prerequisites to develop power through flexibility and softness are gradually understood and progress is made. But, there seems to be an elusive aspect, which is related to the spiritual side of martial power and it is difficult to comprehend, despite the fact that it is thought of as a sine qua non element that integrates serious Budo training and it is stressed on all occasions by all masters.

Yet, this writer believes that there is an essential quality of the spiritual power of Japanese Budo that can be immediately felt because it touches directly people's hearts, and it is none other than the readiness to abandon self.

This attitude of self-abandonment is evident in the esthetics, morality, philosophy and history of the culture that developed Budo. We may sense it in the poetic metaphor of the fragile beauty of a cherry blossom that readily leaves the branch and drops to the earth, in the virtues of modesty and austerity of samurai life and in the clarity one is said to attain by abandoning self-illusions.

Historically, the readiness to abandon self and give away life, has always been a cornerstone of Japan's martial ethos. It has been exemplified in the past by the life and death of brave warriors of ancient, feudal and Meiji era, while one of its recent and most compelling manifestations was the selfless sacrifice of thousands of young Japanese pilots that formed the special attack squadrons of World War II, known in the West as kamikaze.

This attitude (which may well be called heroic and has many parallels in all cultures) carries a message that is worth listening to. On a stone monument erected near the field where the famous battle of Thermopylae took place in 480 B.C. there was a laconic inscription saying "Stranger, announce Spartans that here we lie, obeying their laws". Its value is that it reveals what the 300 Spartans fought and died for. Their laws were the rules by which they lived. Rules, that they themselves adopted and apply. In essence, what they fought for was a way of life and the freedom to define it themselves.

Self-abandonment is an admirable attitude. However, admiration is only an emotional response. If it is to become inspiration and guide for action, the attitude of self-abandonment must be understood and cultivated. It is not a virtue for the sake of itself, except perhaps in the case of a hermit, but then it's more or less meaningless for others. It becomes a meaningful attitude when it is decided for the sake of something wider than self, but with which the self can identify. This is virtually absent in today's developed world.

Some people express skepticism about this attitude, relating it to recklessness or fanaticism, and point that the generally accepted goal of self defense is contradictory to self abandonment. This is not the case. Practically speaking, if one has decided to abandon self, he does not have a lot of things to worry about and most importantly death. Because his mind is not preoccupied by fear he is able to fight to the outmost of his ability. Thus, he has a better chance to survive a real battle, or, to put it in other words, to defend himself more effectively.

Progress towards perfection in martial arts is an individual effort but, according to the tradition of Japanese Budo it is not motivated by individualism. Rather, it should be fuelled by noble ideas and the will to put them to practice. If one believes in the truth and power of these ideas, he should forge his will and commit himself. To do that he needs the spiritual power of Budo.